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HUMANITY'S LONG TRAVAIL AFTER IMMORTALITY

Christian preachers and writers often assert, or seem to assert, that the doctrine of personal immortality and resurrection was new to the Gentile world when the first evangelists of the religion of the Christ went forth from Olivet in obedience to the command of Jesus to convert the nations, and that they owed much of their extraordinary success to the fact that their message contained that great doctrine. Undoubtedly there is a real and a very important sense in which it is true that "life and immortality were brought to light through the gospel," but we shall be hindered instead of helped in understanding that important statement by overlooking the fact that neither immortality nor resurrection were new ideas when Jesus appeared among men.

It is the purpose of this paper to enquire what was the distinctive peculiarity of the Christian religion in relation to these all-important themes, and to show what is the service which it has really rendered mankind in connection with them.

Let us first advert to the state of the question at the beginning of the Christian era. For immemorial ages the doctrine of a future life beyond the grave had left its traces in the religions and philosophies of mankind. Of this the earliest and most impressive example is furnished by ancient Egypt, "the mother of religion." The Pyramid texts of the 5th and 6th dynasties (B. C. 2750) show that men in that early age looked forward to a future judgment "according to the deeds done in the body." The ferryman who conveyed the departed in his boat to the Field of the Blessed, did not receive all who applied for passage, but only those of whom it could be said, "There is no evil which they have done." We need not recall the familiar picture of the deceased appearing before the tribunal of Osiris to answer "guilty," or "not guilty" of the forty-two sins, while his heart is weighed in the balances against the feather of truth to test the validity of his plea. But we must note that their doctrine of immortality went hand in hand with a

doctrine of the transmigration of the soul through every variety of animal life for a period of three thousand years when (so Herodotus reports their belief) it would return to the human body. Moreover their passionate desire to preserve the body from decay through the process of embalming, arose from the belief that as long as the body remained undestroyed, the soul would remain with it and not quickly pass into the bodies of the lower animals.

The Egyptian was never able to detach the future life entirely from the body. "It is evident that he could conceive of no survival of the dead without it."¹ "They said, 'As Osiris lives, so shall he also live.' As the limbs of Osiris were again imbued with life, so shall the Gods raise him up."² So in those earliest ages they contemplated death without dismay, for they said of the dead, "They depart not as those who are dead, but they depart as they who are living."

Now these beliefs of the Egyptians exerted a strong influence upon both Greek and Roman religious conceptions. Indeed the Egyptian religion was widely disseminated in the Roman empire and in Rome itself. This worship had gained a footing in Rome as early as the days of Sulla — it ran like wild-fire over the Empire even as far as Britain.

Another example of the prevalence of the doctrine of immortality is furnished by the Eleusinian mysteries which had been in vogue for centuries before Christ. They were influential even as late as the close of the first century of our era. We find Plutarch (b. A. D. 46) comforting his wife on the death of their little daughter by recalling to her mind the bright vision of the future life which had been revealed to them in the secret mysteries of Dionysos. The thought of immortality is entwined round the legendary figure of Orpheus in the pre-historic age of Grecian story. Pythagoras discoursed of it more than five centuries before Christ. A century later Socrates and Plato constructed their great arguments in favor of the doctrine. The Platonists and Pythagoreans continued to teach it, more or less distinctly for centuries. Then the Roman philosophers and

¹ Breasted's *Egypt*, p. 68.

² *Id.* p. 66.

poets took up the argument, and the doctrine found able exponents in Cicero and Virgil. Even the Stoic philosophy, at first so unfriendly to it, yielded to its influence, and Seneca, in some of his moods, writes with almost the assurance of a Christian concerning the future life: "The moment of death," he says, "is the birthday of eternity; this life is but the prelude to a better life beyond the grave, where the wondrous secrets of the starry worlds shall be revealed."

In the same age we find Plutarch, the Greek historian, clinging fondly to the precious hope of immortality, and vehemently assailing those philosophers who seek to rob men of that hope, on the pretext of delivering them from superstition.

The picture, however, has another side. When we scrutinize it carefully, we find this hope of immortality was often very vague, very pale, and very weak. It was held with a hesitating grasp even by those who were most explicit in avowing it. Some, as the Stoics, held to the notion of a limited immortality; a life renewed beyond the grave, but only till the next great cataclysm of the universe. Others held it in the form of the transmigration of the soul into some other body, perhaps of the lower animals; others held to a kind of impersonal immortality. Even Plato in his sublimest and most triumphant argument for a future life, cannot hide — nor does he seek to hide — the shadow of doubt that darkens his own mind as to the possibility of any conclusive proof of immortality. The best argument he tells us, is but a raft upon which one may sail through life, in default of a revelation from God which might more surely and safely carry him.³ And Seneca—the almost saint, the almost Christian, at least in his reasoning on a future life — even he wavers and hesitates at times between the creed of the materialist and the hope of immortality — appearing to admit the possibility of a return at death to ante-natal nothingness. This is the verdict of the chief Roman philosophers: "Great men avow rather than prove so acceptable a doctrine," and the greatest of Roman orators says of Plato's argument for immor-

³ Phædo, p. 414.

⁴ Tusc. Disp. I xi. 24.

tality: "I have often pondered it, but, I know not how it is, while I read I assent to it, but when I have laid down the book and begun to think with myself concerning the immortality of the soul, all that assent vanishes."⁴ If we go down into the tomb excavated in our day at Mycenæ and at Athens, where we have, so to speak, a statue of the Greek mind in the presence of death, we do not see its brow lifted up to heaven and lit with the radiance of immortality, but rather we see it shadowed with gloom as it bends to earth seeking to gather up in memory's urn the ashes of the life that is gone.

We hear many strong voices lifted up in denial and refutation of the doctrine of immortality. Julius Cæsar in a public speech frankly avows his belief that death is the end of all things for man, "the final term of joy and sorrow." In the same age Lucretius, in his famous and wonderful poem on the nature of things, preached the gospel of nothingness after death; death was a night without a morning, a sleep without an awakening. And a century later Pliny the Elder, the accomplished naturalist, fiercely inveighs against the madness of the doctrine of immortality.

If we turn back to ancient Greece, we find the greatest of all her philosophers, Aristotle, testing the argument of his master, Plato, for immortality with his cold and pitiless logic, and arriving at the conclusion that there is no sufficient proof of a separate conscious future life for man. And then a century later rises Epicurus with his gospel of sensualism and his creed of annihilation at death — a gospel and a creed which exercised a wide sway over men for long ages after. It was, we are told, the prevailing philosophy in the last days of the Republic. On the tombs of the period we read such inscriptions as these:

"Non fueram : non sum : nescio."

"Non fui : fui : non sum : non curo."

The departing sensualist bids his friends walk in his footsteps,

"My friends, while we live, let us live;
Eat, drink, disport thyself, and then join us."

Popular sentiment was also reflected in another epitaph where we read:

"It all ends in the grave, or the funeral pyre."

Passing from the Republic to the early Empire, we find Cicero and Seneca, Juvenal and Plutarch, all testifying to the general incredulity in the immortality of the soul. Gibbon asserts that "at the bar and in the senate of Rome the ablest orators were not apprehensive of giving offense to their hearers, by exposing that doctrine as an idle and extravagant opinion which was rejected with contempt by every man of a liberal education and understanding."⁵

We find Tacitus, the greatest of Roman historians, wavering in opinion on this great theme. He expresses a faint, pious hope of eternal life for his hero Agricola—"if," he adds, "sages are right in thinking souls do not perish with the body." And Galen, the supreme authority in medical science in the Empire, is likewise undecided; he hesitates between conflicting opinions, and can reach no conclusion. It is strange to find a soul so deeply religious as that of Epictetus yet destitute of the hope of immortality. The withering creed of Lucretius has no validity for this noble philosopher. He sees God in the universe; he feels God within his own soul. He lives—and he calls on others to live—as in the sight of God, as the children of God; and yet he cannot grasp the hope of a future life. The immortality of the soul is not part of his creed, high and beautiful as that is in many respects.

Even stranger is it, perhaps, that Marcus Aurelius, the noblest and best of all the Emperors, the saintly philosopher clothed in the imperial purple, should also have rejected the hope of immortality. He was an affectionate father, a model husband, a faithful friend, a ruler just and conscientious, but he had no expectation of a future and a better life than this. Once plunged into the dark waters of death, the conscious ego would never emerge; the longing for immortality was in his judgment an irrational appetite. His creed was embodied in

⁵ Vol. II. ch. XV. 78.

the precept given in view of inevitable death: "Be content; thou hast made thy voyage; thou hast come to shore; quit the ship." No wonder his soul was sad! No wonder he was a pessimist! No wonder he could see no hope of the world growing any better than it was!

This brief review of the opinions and beliefs of the ancients concerning the doctrine of immortality, will enable us the better to realize the achievement of the religion of Jesus Christ in establishing that doctrine so firmly in the minds and hearts of men. But what a spectacle it is that presents itself to the mind as we survey the history of human thought on this subject in those long ages before "life and immortality were brought to light" in the resurrection of Jesus Christ! We see the heart of the race longing after immortality, and striving with pain and travail to attain some assurance of it. An imperious instinct urges men to seek to preserve some bond of union with their loved ones whom death has torn from their arms. Equally imperious is the outcry of the human soul against extinction; and most passionate its longing for personal immortality. This instinctive longing was ever seeking to justify itself through the long ages. It appealed to reason, and right nobly did reason respond to the appeal to build a firm foundation on which this great hope of immortality might rest. It was a splendid structure of argument that the philosophers builded; it seemed firm and solid, and the immortal Hope seemed to rest securely upon it. But by and by this mighty foundation began to show signs of crumbling away. Other philosophers made appeal to reason against it. And so through century after century the battle of the giant philosophers went on, with doubtful issue. It is Plato and Cicero on one side; Aristotle and Lucretius on the other. Perhaps we must admit that on the whole the dialectical victory was with those who challenged the certainty of immortality. "Faith, or love, or instinct, may cross the dark river, but they go alone; reason cannot follow them. Nay more, reason shows that the visions which they see are mere shadows of projections of what we see, and feel now."⁶

⁶ Westcott, Gospel of the Resurrection, p. 155.

But as we study this conflict of ages, we see that the heart of humanity refused to acknowledge defeat. It is a spectacle of infinite pathos—men will not abandon the hope; they will not cease to cherish the vision of a better life beyond. The instinct of immortality is too deep and too strong to be extinguished by dialectics. Men bury it, age after age; but it ever rises from the dead and renews its imperious claim to be heard. What then is the conclusion which we must reach? I think we must say both were right. Reason could not justify the instinctive craving of the soul of man for immortality; the argument was inconclusive. But on the other hand an instinct so deep, so strong, so unconquerable, could not be delusive. If Reason could not justify it, neither could she discredit, or destroy it. The truth of immortality may be beyond the reach of reason, but it is not contrary to reason. If Reason cannot prove it, neither can she disprove it.

We come now to the answer to the question propounded at the outset of this discussion, viz: What was the distinctive peculiarity of the Religion of Jesus Christ in relation to the doctrine of immortality; and what service has it rendered mankind in that connection? The answer of the facts of the case—the answer of history—is that Christianity has cleared away the mists that encompassed this subject; and has “brought life and immortality to light.” For the disciples of Christ the darkness of doubt concerning the future life “is past, and the true light now shineth.” The questionings of the human heart through all those ages; its longings; its yearnings; its struggles after certitude on this tremendous question: “If a man die, shall he live again?” have at last been answered, been appeased in the revelation of the Gospel. The long, long travail of humanity—generation after generation, century after century—has found its end and its satisfaction in Jesus Christ and His resurrection.

Whatever some men may think of the truth of His religion, or of the reality of His resurrection, it is a simple matter of fact that His Gospel inspired in men a conviction and an assurance of personal immortality beyond the tomb which the world had never seen before. It was no longer held as a doubtful conclusion of dialectics, or as a belief based upon the instinctive

craving of the human heart; it was no longer a dim, unsubstantial vision floating before the mind; or a faint and wavering hope; it had become a joyous assurance, a deeply-rooted conviction, which led captive the captivity of doubt and fear — which inspired the heart of the Christian believer with an invincible confidence, and which found expression in the confident challenge:

“O Death, where is thy sting?
O Grave, where is thy victory?”

Thus the Christian faith and hope of immortality came as the answer to the long travail of humanity, and as the fulfillment and glorification of the partial truth contained in the pagan religions and philosophies of the ages. It was a stupendous achievement thus to conquer the doubt and perplexity of mankind and to set the hope of immortality in their heart as the very candle of the Lord. The greatness of the victory achieved by Christianity in this respect is difficult to realize. There are two historical scenes, however, which set over against each other, may help us to grasp the magnitude of the change wrought by the religion of the Nazarene. In the one picture we see “the High Priest of Jupiter, the head of the Roman hierarchy, the chief interpreter of divine things to the pagan conscience,” declaring before the assembled Senators “that immortality is a dream, and future retribution a fable.”⁷ In the other picture we see the Emperor, the head of the Roman State, presiding over that great Council of Christian Bishops which gave to the world the Nicene Creed, one of whose articles of belief is this:

“I look for the Resurrection of the dead,
And the life of the world to come.”

It remains only to point out how this great victory was won — to give reason why Christianity was able to achieve what pagan philosophy and pagan religion had both failed to accomplish. Was the dialectic of St. Paul more convincing than that of Plato? Not so; the apostle makes no attempt to prove by logic the immortality of the Soul. What then? He simply

⁷ Merivale, VII. 495.

preached Jesus and the Resurrection. This was the uniform method of the apostles and early evangelists. They did not offer men a new argument for immortality. Indeed they did not preach the *doctrine* of immortality. Instead of this they proclaimed a new and stupendous Fact. They went forth as witnesses of that Fact; and the Fact was the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth from the dead.

Gibbon, we remember, seeking to explain how it was that the religion of Jesus "derived new vigor from opposition, and finally erected the triumphant banner of the cross on the ruins of the capitol," assigns as one of the chief causes of its success the doctrine of the immortality of the soul.

In this the great historian has missed the point. That doctrine was not peculiar to Christianity. The religions of the East taught it distinctly and positively. Take as the most influential of these in the Roman Empire the religion of Mithra. Mithraism held out to men a positive hope of immortality. It was moreover an ethical religion and presents many remarkable features of resemblance to Christianity. It had its doctrine of a Mediator. It had also its sacraments—its baptism of blood and its communion of consecrated bread and wine. It told of a judgment to come after death, according to the deeds done in the body. It predicted a second coming of Mithra to end evil, when the dead shall rise again.

This religion, so superior in purity and elevation of thought to the polytheistic religions of Greece and Rome, held wide sway in the Empire from the reign of Tiberius onward. Like Christianity it was at first the religion of the poor and lowly, of slaves and freedmen. The soldiers of the legions became its missionaries. It spread westward and northward. Its chapels were found over Europe from the Danube to the borders of Scotland.

Why then did not the religion of Mithra conquer the world instead of the religion of Christ? If the doctrine of immortality was the great weapon which should win the hearts of men, then Mithraism should have been victorious, for it proclaimed eternal life as the reward of virtue. The Fathers, indeed, from the second century, saw in Mithra the most formidable rival

of Christ. Nevertheless it was Christ not Mithra who conquered. And why? Just because the religion of Christ did not preach an abstract doctrine of immortality, but proclaimed the stupendous fact of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. It has a living Christ to preach to men, a Christ who had trod this earth in quick sympathy with men, a Christ who had submitted voluntarily to the stroke of death for the redemption of men from sin, a Christ who in dying had conquered death, and who rose from the dead the third day; a Christ who dares to say to the trembling, doubting sons of men,

"I am the Resurrection and the Life."

The skeptical historian of the Decline and Fall of the great Empire confesses that "the most sublime efforts of philosophy could extend no further than feebly to point out the desire, the hope, or, at most, the probability of a future state."⁸ But the religion of Christ inspired in the hearts of men a profound conviction of the certainty of immortality and of the resurrection from the dead. So strong was this conviction, so firm its hold upon the minds of the disciples of Christ, that it triumphed — and still triumphs — over the fear of torture and death; so that multitudes, not of men only, but of women and even children were ready to die rather than deny Christ.

This achievement is peculiar to the Christian Religion. No other religion has succeeded in inspiring the minds of mankind over wide areas, with this joyful certainty of immortality and resurrection.

And if we are asked how we explain this unique power of Christianity, the answer is plain: it is because no other religion has a Christ to preach to men, a Christ who lived for mankind, who died for mankind, who rose from the dead for mankind. Yes, it is the Easter Message which has given new hope to the weary heart of the world, tired and worn with its long quest after immortality. It is the message of the Risen Christ which has at last triumphed over doubt and given mankind assurance of life and resurrection. But there is no Risen Christ, and

⁸ Ch. XV. p. 79.

there is no Gospel of the Resurrection unless the death, the burial and the resurrection, are "facts, exactly in the same sense," "supported by evidence identical in kind," and "bound together indissolubly as the groundwork of the Christian Faith."

We heartily echo the strong words of Westcott: "If the Resurrection be not true in the same sense in which the Passion is true, then Death still remains the Great Conqueror. As far as all experience goes, no pledge has been given to us of his defeat. A splendid guess, an inextinguishable desire alone have sought to pierce the darkness beyond the tomb, if Jesus has not (as we believe) borne our human nature into the presence of God."⁹

This is the strength of the religion of Jesus that it offers to men,—not a new argument for immortality,—not a new doctrine of immortality,—but the Gospel of the Risen Christ,—an actual instance of the conquest of death by a man, and that man the Representative Man, the Second Adam. This is the sublime message: "As all (who are) in Adam die, even so all (who are) in Christ shall be made alive."¹⁰

With this great gospel of the Resurrection (*I am the Resurrection and the Life*) ringing in his ears, every Christian man may go forth joyfully to his work and to his labor until the evening; and when the evening comes, and the shadow of Death falls across his path, he may make the last words of Edward the Confessor his own, and say to those around him: "Weep not; I shall not die but live; and as I leave the land of the dying, I trust to see the blessings of the Lord in the land of the living." This then is the conclusion of the whole matter. Christ's words, while yet he lived among men, were these:

I am the Resurrection and the Life. He that believeth on Me, though he were dead, yet shall he live; and whosoever liveth and believeth in Me, shall never die.

The world had never heard such words before. No sage, no philosopher, no prophet, had ever dared to put himself forward,

⁹ The Gospel of the Resurrection, p. 6.

¹⁰ 1 Cor. XV, 22.

as Jesus of Nazareth here does,—not, be it observed, as the herald, or the messenger of the Resurrection and the Eternal Life, but as the embodiment—as the Source—as the cause, of the resurrection of men from the dead, and of their personal investiture with immortality.

It was thus “He brought Life and Immortality to light” in His own Person—in His own Resurrection. The words of St. Paul (as he really uttered them, not as our authorized Version represents them) answer our question. ‘What service did the Christian Religion render mankind in relation to this great subject of immortality?’ *πρῶτος ἐξ ἀναστάσεως νεκρῶν φῶς μέλλει καταγγέλλειν τῷ λαῷ καὶ τοῖς ἔθνεσι* (Acts xxvi. 23). “He first—by the resurrection from the dead—shall proclaim light to the people and to the gentiles.”

The old Gnostics were right when they called the Cross “Horos,” the Boundary Line. On the farther side of it we see Humanity painfully and fruitlessly striving to achieve for itself the certainty of immortality—as if in anticipation of the counsel of Constantine the Great when he said to the old Novatian, “Take a ladder, Acesius, and climb to heaven by yourself.” On this side the Cross and the Open Sepulchre we see men rejoicing in the revelation of immortality in Christ, while they behold the heavens opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man,—the ladder set up on Earth whose top reached to Heaven.

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